

Liner Notes, By Richard Prelinger

To New Horizons

Ephemeral Films 1931-1945

To New Horizons contains clips from 19 rarely-seen motion pictures, leftovers from the golden age of American industry. Most of these films were paid for by large corporations to promote their products. But on a more fundamental level, they were made to sell their sponsors' view of the world — “Trust us with the control of technology [and everything else] and we’ll give you progress without end.”

To New Horizons begins in the hard days of the Depression with the leer of a peeping Tom. The bizarre, deformed and licentious characters populating *In My Merry Oldsmobile* (the first selection, and also the frankest) were creatures of the vaudeville era rather than the streamlined age — New Yorkers rather than Californians, like the Fleischers who created them. Although this cartoon belonged to an immigrant subculture, rather than a one-size-fits all, “Mickey Mouse” mass culture, it was actually sponsored by the Olds Motor Works.

In Detroit, modern mass production was in full swing. In 1936, the year of *Modern Times* and *Triumph of the Will*, *Master Hands* (one of the most dazzling “institutional” films ever made) was produced, ostensibly as a tribute to Chevrolet workmen. It was equally intended, though, to enoble the system of mass production, as developed by the management of General Motors. But its producers were documentarians enough to show something of the factory's actual nature. Bursting with pride, *Master Hands* stops at each station along the assembly line, showing us its speed, its hazards and its frightening scale.

Master Hands, like most of the films included on this laserdisc, was produced to fulfill a specific commercial or educational purpose. Unlike feature films or newsreels, these movies were produced to meet a specific need and were never intended to be preserved. It is in this sense that we call them ephemeral.

Institutional films were sponsored by corporations, but not to promote specific product lines. Rather, they were designed to promote the corporations themselves, or sometimes broader and vaguer concepts such as “progress” or “freedom of choice.” Produced by large studios such as the Jam Handy Organization, Wilding Pictures or Audio Productions, these films were made to order for their sponsors. Stories, scripts and final cut required approval at every stage; the creative egotism that characterized movie production in Hollywood was absent, since the work of writers, directors, designers and stars was always subject to client demands. These collective works — never the product of one person's imagination — had an anonymous character, by comparison with the documentaries and feature films of their era. Furthermore, these films were not influenced by the same mythologies as Hollywood features (whether literary, dramatic or cultural) — and were, therefore, products of a modern, advertising-oriented age, saying precisely

what their sponsors wanted them to say. So for us these films are a unique window on the past, more revealing (and more accessible) than most feature films.

Safety films have always sought to place the responsibility for accidents on individuals, while deflecting it from corporations and government. *We Drivers*, produced as part of an industry-wide safety campaign in 1936, places a policeman in each and every driver's head, drumming safety maxims into the heads of the audience. The system cannot work without discipline and training; nor, as in *Chevrolet Leader News*, without surveillance.

Unlike World War II and thereafter, when science and weapons development became inseparable, the Depression was an age of more benevolent, "hands-on" science, dealing with such reassuring matters as mechanical accuracy, precision and exactitude. Though the *Precisely So's* march is paramilitary, it is the fantasy of engineers, not atomic scientists.

Extra, *Breakfast Pals* and *Three Smart Daughters* were made to precede the main attraction in movie theatres, and, being "Minute Movies," were designed to make their point in one minute or less. Seen in theaters beginning in the early 1930s, they no doubt influenced the design and structure of the television commercial, which came into being on July 1, 1941.

"Madam, will you tell us what suds mean to you?" asks the narrator in *Oxydol Goes Into High*. It was good of him to ask. As the Thirties wore on, advertisers and marketers refined their selling techniques, which grew ever closer to resemble the methods of pure science. They interrogated the consumer, asking her needs, speaking to her directly; moreover, they created exemplary consumers and began to use them in role-playing dramas, instituting a common denominator of "humanity" so as to link consumers and corporations.

But the menacing shadows of corporate headquarters towers loom in the background of *Round and Round*, the only selection on this disc clearly produced to appeal to the minds of children. This film is "voodoo economics" at its best. Even if we are to take this film's dramatization of capitalism at face value, how can we explain the stunning lack of motivation evidenced here? No one ever mentions the word "profit," and the implication is that widget-making is the activity of a gang of unintelligent puppets who don't even dare to be selfish.

Since "turnabout is fair play," as the announcer says, *Back of the Mike* is included just for fun. Though radio was king in 1939, regular telecasting began that same year in New York City. Just as radio then fooled the ear, television would later fool the eye.

To our cast of marching tools, talking signs and economically-illiterate puppets, we now bring *Roll-Oh*, the chromium-plated butler. Though *Roll-Oh* is just a daydream after all," not touted as any sort of a real promise of the future, and probably in fact an imitation of "Electro," the Westinghouse robot at the 1939 World's Fair, he (it) takes the modernization of the kitchen one step further, at least as a joke; the idea advanced is that housework can be industrialized, that the housewife can be replaced by a robot.

The meeting of Modernism and technological progress peaked at the 1939 Fair in New York. This was the best of the World's Fairs, remembered fondly by those who were there and

now an object of extreme fascination for those who were not. The New York World's Fair might be viewed as a larger, fancier and more highly developed version of many of the films on this disc — it was, among other things, the last great pre-war attempt to humanize technology, to capture and enlist public faith in the mission of scientists and engineers, working under the direction of manufacturers. Every sector of industry redesigned society along utopian lines; the farm, the city and the kitchen were all re-presented in modernist garb. Befitting its status as the largest American industrial corporation, General Motors went all out with its "Highways and Horizons" exhibit, featuring the fabulous *Futurama*.

Futurama was an audacious promise, nothing less than a total restructuring of space and time, achieved by reorganizing land use and transportation. It employed all of the language that we commonly hear in the description of utopian schemes, but borrowed it to promote an agenda belonging to a single company. This "borrowed utopia" has since then continued to haunt us, from Disneyland to the "kitchen of tomorrow" that resurfaces every few years, unchanging,

Dr. Donald A. Laird, who earlier brought us the typist-in-gas mask experiment, returned with *Let Yourself Go*, his "new age" plan, 1940-style. In a way this film signified that Americans had by then truly entered into an age of leisure—one must now work at relaxing.

Just a week after Pearl Harbor, a man fulfilled his fantasy through a television set (*Magic in the Air*). Six months after commercial TV was introduced (it had by then spread to only three cities) this film proposed staying at home and watching television as a means of avoiding the hassles of public events. Furthermore, it showed the technology satisfying forbidden desires, despite its extreme youth; from the TV set, a blonde actress materialized, holding a bottle so as to freshen up the viewer's drink.

While science promised the consumer entertainment, progress and leisure, it promised business increased control over its customers. "Scientifically-placed poster panels," placed all over the city of Chicago in the film *To Market, To Market*, dominated the visual landscape and "influenced the buying choices" of all Chicagoans, no matter how young or old. The mission of the billboards, as explained in the narration, was very close to the mission of these ephemeral films—to jump the gap between industry and consumers, and make the sale.

Finally, in the middle of the war, came marriage by mail. Although Max Fleischer probably did not intend to promote this social twist, he did suggest that television might one day become a handy substitute for togetherness. For this prophetic insight, his *News Sketch* earns a place on this laserdisc.

-Richard Prelinger
For Kathy High